



THE ENCOUNTERING JESUS SERIES

Your
CHRISTIAN
Vocation

AVE MARIA PRESS

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Introduction

Picture a couple exchanging vows on their wedding day. Now imagine a young man heading off from home to begin his seminary studies, an important step on the long road to ordination. Finally, picture a young woman professing vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as she becomes a consecrated religious sister.

Consider what these three scenes have in common. In each, a person (or, in the case of the marriage, a couple) is taking a significant step toward a permanent, lifelong commitment—in other words, toward living out a vocation. In Baptism, God called each of these individuals to holiness, fidelity, and love: to a life given in service to others and characterized by a deep, abiding commitment to the Gospel values expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Their respective vocations of marriage, ordination, and religious life are each a means of living out this baptismal call and of sharing in Jesus' ministry as priest, prophet, and king (see CCC, 783–786).

Yet as you consider these three images, do you sense that something—or someone—is missing?

Have you ever wondered about the **single life**? Do **single people** have a **vocation**? Or are all single people meant to marry, be ordained, or become a consecrated religious?

These are legitimate questions! After all, you and your classmates are single right now (even if you are in a long-term dating relationship or seriously discerning ordination or religious life), and you will likely remain single for many more years. You may have older siblings or cousins, some of whom hope to marry someday, who are currently single. You may know aunts, uncles, or other family members who have never

married or who are divorced or widowed. The circumstances that lead a person to the single life, whether temporarily or permanently, are many and varied.

Moreover, people in the United States are spending more time than ever as single people. As recently as the 1960s, many young people embarked on a lifelong commitment—whether to marriage, ordination, or religious life—soon after high school graduation. That is no longer the norm. The median age at first marriage in the United States is currently twenty-seven for women and twenty-nine for men, and the median age at ordination is thirty-one.

This chapter will help you to explore the single life as a vocation. The Church does not view the single life as a vocation the way she views marriage, priesthood, and consecrated life as vocations. These three primary vocations all represent an exclusive, permanent, lifelong gift of self, whether to a spouse (as in marriage) or to the Church (as in ordination and consecrated life). Although the single life in many cases is not a permanent commitment, it is, like all vocations, a vocation to love. Because of their circumstances, single people are able to love—to give of themselves in generous service—in unique ways.

SECTION ASSESSMENT



COMPREHENSION

1. When do individuals first receive a call to holiness, fidelity, and love?
2. What do all vocations have in common?



CRITICAL THINKING

3. Why doesn't the Church view the single life as a vocation the way she views marriage, priesthood, and consecrated life as vocations?



REFLECTION

4. Do you think that people staying single longer is a positive social trend or a negative one? Explain your view in one paragraph.

SECTION 1

What Is the Single Life?

We can categorize the single life as either *transitional single life* or *permanent single life*. A person living transitional single life is planning to make a lifelong commitment in the form of marriage vows or religious vows one day. He or she does not intend to remain single permanently. Consider these examples:

1

a senior in college who has dated several people in the hope of finding the person he or she is called to marry

2

a recent college graduate who is working part-time while he completes his seminary application

3

a person in his or her twenties who has an enjoyable, stable job but is visiting and researching various religious communities in an effort to discern a call to religious life

4

a person in his or her thirties who would very much like to be married but has not yet found the right person

5

an older person whose spouse has died and who has begun dating again, hoping to remarry

All of these single people are living the transitional single life because they are taking concrete steps to discern their permanent vocation. With God's help and grace, they will find that permanent vocation and experience deep peace and lasting joy as a result.

In contrast, some people embrace the permanent single life. Unlike those in the situations cited above, they are not actively seeking a spouse, ordination, or a religious

community. Within this category of permanent single life, we can distinguish between those who are single by circumstance and those who are single by choice.

A variety of circumstances may contribute to the single status of a person who did not desire or choose this state in life. The person may have wanted to marry but never found or fell in love with a suitable person. A commitment to education and/or a demanding career may have left little time for dating or discernment. In other cases, divorce may have led the person to a single life that he or she did not plan and may be unprepared for.

In contrast, people who are permanently single by choice have decided that being single is the best way for them to live out the universal call to holiness they received at their Baptism. They are no longer dating or discerning a call to another vocation; rather, they have embraced an intentional single life *as their state of life*. Being single provides a certain freedom that is generally not available to a person who is married, ordained, or consecrated to a religious community. This freedom affords permanently single people the opportunity to give of themselves generously and courageously without having to negotiate the responsibilities of marriage or religious life. For example, some permanently single people serve as primary caregivers for elderly parents or grandparents or for family members with physical or intellectual disabilities. Others are immersed in service-oriented careers such as researching cures for deadly diseases or running nonprofit organizations. Still others engage in long-term volunteer or missionary work, often overseas. The intentional single life, then, becomes a genuine path to holiness, a way to grow in love of both God and neighbor.

Beth Knobbe, who works full-time for Catholic Relief Services (a humanitarian aid organization sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), has reflected extensively on her own vocation as a single person. She believes that this is the life to which God has called her: "I have . . . known for quite

some time that my vocation in life is to live as an intentional single person. I'm not waiting to get married. I'm not biding time until something better comes along."¹ In her book *Party of One: Living Single with Faith, Purpose, and Passion*, she addresses several myths about the single life, such as that single people are selfish, lonely, and overly absorbed in their work and that all single people have missed their calling to religious life. According to Beth, rather than mistakenly thinking of the single life as a sort of "last resort," single people should "live with a sense of purpose, ready to respond to God's call in whatever way that unfolds."²

Similarly, Brian Finnerty, an intentionally single person who belongs to Opus Dei (a Roman Catholic apostolic association called a personal prelature), believes strongly that remaining single in order to make himself available for prayer and service "was what God wanted me to do with my life." He joined Opus Dei in 1985 and subsequently became its US communications director. When people wonder why he has chosen the single life instead of priesthood or consecrated religious life, he explains that "the world needs lay people on fire with Christ's message and dedicated to transforming the world from within. It needs lay people head-over-heels for Christ."³

The **Church recognizes** the great gift that **single people** are to the **Church and the world**.

Archbishop Robert J. Carlson of St. Louis put it well when he observed that "single men and women who have given themselves wholeheartedly to Christ are fully committed individuals. They bind themselves to the service of others, and they participate directly in the Church's mission and share themselves intimately with those who walk with them on the journey to Christ's kingdom." In addition, the Church desires to support single people—whether they are transitionally or permanently single—with pastoral care that assures them of God's infinite love and boundless mercy. As the *Catechism* states, "We must also remember the great number of single persons who, because of the particular circumstances in which they have to live—often not of their choosing—are especially close to Jesus' heart and therefore deserve the special affection and active solicitude of the Church, especially of pastors" (CCC, 1658).

SECTION ASSESSMENT



COMPREHENSION

1. What is the difference between transitional single life and permanent single life?
2. What is the difference between being permanently single by circumstance and being permanently single by choice?



REFLECTION

3. Choose one of the quotes that appear in this section (from Beth Knobbe, Brian Finnerty, Archbishop Carlson, or the *Catechism*). Write a brief reflection on why this quote is meaningful to you. What wisdom or insight does it offer you to help clarify your own path as a single person?

SECTION 2

Exemplary Single People

From the earliest days of the Church, many single people have been exemplary role models for all who seek to live in a manner that is holy, just, and faithful to Jesus Christ. Some of Jesus' Apostles and disciples were single, including the siblings *Martha*, *Mary*, and *Lazarus* of Bethany (see Luke 10:38–42 and John 12:1–8) and *St. Mary Magdalene*, who was among those holy women who provided for Jesus and the Apostles “out of their resources” (Lk 8:3). *St. Paul's* single life gave him the ability to travel and preach the Gospel throughout the Mediterranean world. His first documented European convert to Christianity, *Lydia*, was also single (see Acts 16:11–15). As the Church continued to grow and flourish beyond the apostolic era, *St. Praxedes* (d. AD 165) and *St. Agatha* (AD 231–251)—both young women who lived in Rome during times of persecution—refused marriage and instead gave their time and resources to the fledgling Church. Much later, *St. Giuseppe Moscati* (1880–1927), a physician, devoted his life to his career, serving cholera victims in Naples and treating wounded soldiers during World War I.

In more recent times, *Dorothy Day*, cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement, and *Jean Vanier*, founder of L'Arche International, demonstrate the possibilities the single life provides for wholehearted commitment to Gospel values and to the service of all of God's people, especially those most in need.

Servant of God Dorothy Day

Dorothy Day⁴ was born in Brooklyn on November 8, 1897. Her family eventually moved to Chicago, where she was baptized in the Episcopal Church. In 1916,

she returned to New York, where she found work as a journalist and became involved in the women's suffrage and worker's rights movements. As a young adult, Day struggled to find her path. She was involved in several romantic relationships; when one of these resulted in pregnancy, she had an abortion.

Throughout these tumultuous years, Day had always felt drawn to the Catholic Church. Slowly, her longing for God awakened, and she began attending daily Mass. When, in 1925, she became pregnant again, she carried the pregnancy to term and gave birth to her only child, a daughter, Tamar, whom she had baptized as a Catholic. Day herself became Catholic one year later and as a result ended her relationship with Tamar's father, who had little interest in Day's newfound faith.

In 1932, while in Washington, DC, to cover a march of unemployed workers at the US Capitol for a Catholic magazine, she prayed at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. As she describes in her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, she “offered up a special prayer, a prayer which came with tears and with anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor.”⁵ Shortly after arriving home, she met Peter Maurin, another single Catholic layperson, with whom she would found the Catholic Worker Movement.

The Catholic Worker began as a newspaper published out of Day's New York apartment and sold for a penny a copy. The paper sought to articulate and advocate for the needs of the poor, who were suffering through the Great Depression, through the lens of the Gospel. In time, what began as a journalistic endeavor grew into a social movement as Day and Maurin attracted other Catholics who joined them in opening houses of hospitality, first in New York and then around the country. These houses offered food, shelter, and friendship to anyone in need at any time—no questions asked.

Dorothy Day's life as a single person enabled her to devote her whole self to the movement she had founded. She lived extremely simply, eating the same food that she served to people in need of assistance and wearing donated clothes. As the movement grew, she maintained the freedom to travel wherever she was most needed without having to negotiate with a husband or with a religious superior. She continued her social and political advocacy, supporting both the civil rights and the antiwar movements of the 1960s, even committing acts of civil disobedience that led to her arrest. She gave her time, energy, and talents in the service of the Gospel values of justice, equality, and peace. Day's life provides particular inspiration for Catholic single parents, as she struggled to raise her daughter by herself while running an increasingly large and multifaceted social movement.

In his address to a joint session of the US Congress on September 24, 2015, Pope Francis cited Dorothy Day as one of four notable Americans worthy of emulation, stating: "In these times when social concerns are so important, I cannot fail to mention the Servant of God Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker Movement. Her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints."⁶

Dorothy Day died on November 29, 1980. Today, the *Catholic Worker* newspaper still sells for a penny a copy, and there are more than two hundred Catholic Worker communities in fifteen countries. The Holy See is considering Day as a candidate for sainthood.

Jean Vanier

Born in 1928 in Switzerland to Canadian parents, Jean Vanier⁷ served in both the British and the Canadian navies as a young man. Later, he completed a doctoral degree in philosophy and embarked on a promising

academic career centered on university-level teaching and research.

In 1964, Vanier first became aware of the large number of people with intellectual disabilities who were confined to institutions, where they lived out their days in loneliness and isolation from the rest of the human family. Moved by their plight, he felt called to alleviate their suffering and thus invited two developmentally disabled young men, Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux, to live with him in his home in Troisy-Breuil, France. From this initial act of generosity and courage, the global movement "of L'Arche—"the Ark"—was born.

L'Arche is a network of small, home-based communities in which people with and without intellectual disabilities live together, seeking both to foster a spirit of inclusion, faith, and friendship and, more broadly, to create a society that values every person as God's beloved child. L'Arche communities bear witness to a fundamental truth: that all of us, with or without a disability, need and deserve respect, justice, and joy. As Vanier described it: "Our community life is beautiful and intense, a source of life for everyone. People with a disability experience a real transformation and discover confidence in themselves; they discover their capacity to make choices, and also find a certain liberty and above all their dignity as human beings."⁸ Jean Vanier shared his home with people with developmental disabilities in the original L'Arche community in France until his death in May 2019.

Like Dorothy Day's, Jean Vanier's life illuminates how single people can freely offer their lives, resources, and talents in service to others. Had Vanier been married with children, or if he had been a priest or consecrated religious, his ability to open his home to Raphaël and Philippe would have been much more limited; in fact, he might not have been able to do it. And yet this act of "welcoming the stranger" (see Matthew 25:35)

bore much fruit: today, 152 L'Arche communities are thriving in 37 countries, including the United States.

The Single Life and You

Of course, not every single person is called to found an international movement like the Catholic Worker or L'Arche. Yet we know that, by virtue of our Baptism, we are all called to holiness.

The Catholic Worker and L'Arche, as well as other organizations like the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and the Maryknoll Missioners, welcome young people to give a year or more of full-time volunteer service and solidarity with those in need. Would you consider engaging in this type of experience? In what other ways might you use the relative freedom and flexibility of the single life to serve God and God's people?

We are all called to **serve the suffering Body of Christ** and to proclaim the **Gospel** in both word and deed. During the years that you are **single—whether transitionally or permanently**—how will you **respond to this call?**

SECTION ASSESSMENT



COMPREHENSION

1. Name three exemplary single people who appear in the New Testament.
2. What did Dorothy Day pray for during her 1932 visit to the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception?
3. What is the Catholic Worker?
4. What happened in 1964 that changed the course of Jean Vanier's life?
5. What is L'Arche?



CRITICAL THINKING

6. How did being single help Dorothy Day and Jean Vanier to engage in loving service that might not have been possible otherwise?



REFLECTION

7. Choose either Dorothy Day or Jean Vanier. What aspects of his or her life story do you find particularly compelling, inspiring, or thought provoking? What is the most important lesson you can learn from him or her?

Conclusion

We all begin our lives as single people. In Baptism, we become members of Christ's own Body, the Church, called to grow in holiness as we serve God and our sisters and brothers. As we learn and grow among a loving family and supportive friends, our relationship with God also matures, and we begin to discern the vocation to which God is calling us. Those who are called to marriage, ordination, or religious life may spend many years in the transitional single life, seeking out a potential spouse, preparing for ordination, or researching and visiting various religious communities. These transitional single years need not be simply a passive "waiting period" until our real lives start. Rather, these years can be a valuable opportunity for prayer, reflection, and personal growth as we delight in the gifts of family, friends, work, and education.

Those who find themselves in the **permanent single life**—whether **by circumstance or by choice**—might consider **asking God** how they may best be of service in **building up his Kingdom**.

Are they being called to assume more responsibility in the care of their parents, grandparents, nieces, or nephews? Might they devote more time to their career, particularly if that career is service-oriented? Is God inviting them to consider full-time volunteer service for a year or two (or maybe longer)? A genuine openness to God's will—cultivated through prayer and participation in the sacraments—will support the permanently single person in finding a vocational path that is meaningful, satisfying, and life-giving—most importantly, a path gives glory to God.

SECTION ASSESSMENT



COMPREHENSION

1. What opportunities can the transitional single life offer?



REFLECTION

2. Write a prayer in which you ask God for grace and guidance in your single years, whether those years turn out to be transitional or permanent.

Chapter Assignment

Complete the following assignment assessing your understanding of the material in this chapter.

Working individually or with a partner (according to your teacher's direction), interview a person who is single. With the person's permission, record the interview (either audio or video). Here are some sample questions to pose during the interview (you may think of others you wish to add):

- ▶ Describe your life as a single person. What are some of the challenges you face? What are some of the blessings and opportunities you derive from being single?
- ▶ Do you consider yourself to be transitionally single or permanently single? Why?
- ▶ Who are some single role models who have inspired or guided you?
- ▶ How has being single had an impact on your relationship with God?
- ▶ Do you feel that the Church supports you in your single life? If so, in what ways? If not, what are some ways you think the Church could more effectively support single people?
- ▶ What advice would you give to a transitionally single person? To a permanently single person?

Then write a two-page (minimum) summary of the interview. The concluding paragraph of your summary must be a personal reflection on what you learned from this interview, particularly with regard to your own life as a single person. If you complete this assignment with a partner, each of you must write your own summary/reflection.

Turn in both your written summary and the audio or video recording of the interview to your teacher. Be prepared to share and discuss your interview with your classmates.

Notes

1. Beth Knobbe, "About Me," <https://bethknobbe.com/about>.
2. Beth Knobbe, *Party of One: Living Single with Faith, Purpose, and Passion* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011), xi and ix.
3. Jim Graves, "Single by Vocation," *Catholic World Report*, April 25, 2012, <http://www.catholicworldreport.com/2012/04/25/single-by-vocation>.
4. "Brief Biography," The Dorothy Day Guild website, <http://dorothydayguild.org/about-her-life/brief-biography>.
5. Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), 166.
6. Francis, Address of the Holy Father to the Joint Session of the United States Congress, September 24, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html.
7. "Biography," Jean Vanier Official Site, <https://www.jean-vanier.org/en/meet-jean/biography>.
8. "Jean Vanier," L'Arche USA website, <https://www.larcheusa.org/who-we-are/jean-vanier>.